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## RELIGION, SCIENCE AND ALBERT EINSTEIN

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*A Sermon by the Rev. A. POWELL DAVIES, D.D.*

ALL SOULS' CHURCH (UNITARIAN), WASHINGTON, D. C.

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ALBERT EINSTEIN will be a great world figure for as long as history continues to be written. To an extent which it would be difficult to exaggerate, he has changed the course of events. That he has not done this alone does not lessen his stature. No great achievement is an entirely solitary one. It is enough that he was pre-eminent.

One of the ways in which he has changed the course of events is through the use that has been made of his discovery that energy and mass are convertible: that  $e=mc^2$ . This formula was the basis of the work that produced the atom bomb. It must also be recognized that it was Albert Einstein who impressed upon President Roosevelt the urgent need to develop an atom bomb in this country lest Hitler's Germany develop one first. Quite possibly, no man of lesser stature could have persuaded Mr. Roosevelt to make the large investment that was necessary. Certainly, to a non-scientific mind the probability of success must have seemed a remote one. Whatever may come of atomic energy, whether good or evil, the magnitude of Einstein's impact upon human affairs is in this respect alone immense and incalculable.

But there were other aspects, and they are scarcely less dramatic. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the universe was viewed as mechanistic, deterministic and solid, being composed of a vast multitude of irreducible particles called atoms. Science appeared to allow no room for spiritual values except as accidental expressions of materialistic phenomena.

This was changed by other scientists besides Einstein, but it was he who, more than all others, dissolved the pretensions of the earlier physics and made manifest the fluidity and obscurity of physical reality.

It is not my thought, this morning, however, to go into these aspects of Albert Einstein's achievements. I leave that to others. But perhaps, for the sake of conveying as simply as possible the significance of the change that Einstein was largely responsible for, I should quote the lines written by the English critic, J. C. Squire, who appended them to the following lines of Alexander Pope's:

"Nature, and Nature's law, lay hid in night;  
God said, Let Newton be! and all was light."

Thus Alexander Pope. And now, J. C. Squire:

"It did not last: the Devil, howling Ho!  
Let Einstein be! restored the status quo."

But it was not the Devil. It was just scientific discovery that made earlier viewpoints largely obsolete.

What I would like to talk about is Einstein, the scientist, and religion. I am afraid that now that Einstein is dead, a great deal will be said of him and religion which has very little basis. For my own part, I prefer to have him speak chiefly for himself. With this in view, there recurs to my mind the recollection of a conference of scientists and theologians that took place in New York City in September 1940. I remember that at the time this rather remarkable conference took place, I recalled the somewhat extravagant prediction of the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, who foretold a day when the wolf "shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling" all form a happy community together. Perhaps we have all experienced a certain amount of hesitation in assimilating this prophecy. We might have preferred a more moderate symbolism. Indeed, I must confess that to me the passage is always associated with a somewhat inconvenient recollection. A professor who happened to be reading the passage aloud to us in theological school in connection with some subject that he wanted to expound, when he reached the words, "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb," interrupted himself and was heard to say, *sotto voce*, "Yes, and the lamb will be inside!" I remember how afraid I was that his interpretation might be valid.

But in 1940, Isaiah's prophecy was almost fulfilled. Scientist and theologian met together without either trying to swallow up the other. Of course, they took a little playful bite at one another, now and then, but not with a hearty appetite. What was it that brought about this

rather remarkable occasion? Well, for nearly a century, scientists and theologians had regarded each other, generally speaking, as natural enemies. In the opinion of scientists, theologians believed and taught an antiquated jumble of superstitions, the effect of which was to confuse the mind and thwart its progress in the genuine search for truth. Theologians, on the other hand, regarded scientists as diligent but petty-minded earthlings, patiently digging the human race back into the aboriginal slime. This thing called science, it was plainly evident, was slowly expelling God from his heaven and pushing everything hopeful and promising over the edge of possibility into a dark and unexplorable abyss.

And so, scientists and theologians had been hostile to each other. But after the turn of the century, there began to be a sort of uneasy armistice. Theologians were learning a little science and were beginning to respect it. Scientists were less certain of themselves and were not sure that they were standing upon any firmer ground in the last analysis than were the theologians. Some of the scientists, like the famous Eddington, Jeans, Millikin and Thompson, were, to a limited degree, *becoming* theologians: that is to say, they were writing about the possible rationality of religious faith from the standpoint of students of physical science. Then came Hitler and war, and the discovery by scientists and theologians that they faced a common enemy—barbarism, the perversion of all civilized values, whether those treasured by science or those precious to religion—and this brought the scientists and theologians somewhat closer together.

If theology was shaky in supporting the faith and purpose that were needed to hold civilization together, so was science. Indeed, science had little to offer in this area. So scientists wanted to discover, with a new urgency—one which was to become still greater before the war ended—what there was that could sanction spiritual and moral values and maintain them.

It was in this situation that the conference of scientists and theologians was held in 1940. What is it, they asked, that at the heart of our civilization nurtures the quest for truth and all the purposes and values that men call spiritual? What is it that makes us concerned to preserve democracy and liberty? What brings about this love that we have for our Western way of life? Why do we esteem freedom of mind and conscience so highly? Why do we resent injustice and desire to make a better world? What is it that urges us to defend these things as infinitely precious? Why do we believe in what we call the dignity of man?

There is, said the scientists, something in our civilization, something in ourselves, that *is* spiritual and it ought to be made explicit. For the time is growing short: what we do not do soon we may never have the chance

of doing. At the New York Conference, therefore, scientists and theologians met together in the hope of discovering what it was that they held in common, and of being able to describe it.

It was to this conference that Albert Einstein, the most famous of all scientists, dispatched a paper. He was not able to appear and read it for himself. This, perhaps, was something that he did not care to do. But it was read in his behalf. And it seemed to those who heard it that Professor Einstein was not being tactful.

The first thing to be done, he said, is to abandon the idea of a personal God. Instead, there should be substituted a religion depending upon those "forces which are capable of cultivating the Good, the True and the Beautiful in Humanity itself."

What an inauspicious beginning! Here was a conference of theologians and scientists trying to get together and agree on something, and Einstein, instead of passing quickly and deftly over their most important differences, emphasizes the chief obstacle to their ever getting together at all. "Give up God," he tells the theologians; "or at any rate, a personal God."

But Professor Einstein was stating a necessary case. If he had been himself a theologian, he could have presented the same idea with equal candor and with less offense. But he spoke as a scientist and it was up to the theologians to interpret him.

Einstein knew that there was no power left in the ancient ways of belief that could save civilization. He saw that the pretensions of the creeds were all alike. What you had to get at was the thing behind the creeds—a thing that a man might experience and know as real whether he was a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Taoist, a Buddhist or a Jew. Yes, or even an atheist if that was the way his mind worked. The common values must have a common basis and all who esteem these values must have a common faith. This faith, said Mr. Einstein, cannot be a faith in what has been known as a personal God. But let me quote him:

"The idea of God in the religions taught at present is a sublimation of the old conception of the gods. Its anthropomorphic character is shown, for instance, by the fact that men appeal to the Divine Being in prayers and plead for the fulfilment of their wishes.

"Nobody certainly will deny," he goes on, "that the idea of the existence of an omnipotent, just and omnibenevolent personal God is able to accord man solace, help and guidance; also, by virtue of its simplicity, the concept is accessible to the most undeveloped mind.

"But on the other hand, there are decisive weaknesses attached to this

idea itself, which have been painfully felt since the beginning of history. That is, if this Being is omnipotent, then every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought and every human feeling and aspiration, is also his work.

"How then is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thoughts before such an Almighty Being? In giving out punishment and rewards, He would to a certain extent be passing judgment on Himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to him?"

Which are all old questions, but they have never been satisfactorily answered. Is it not better, as well as more likely to be true, Mr. Einstein is asking, to abandon the belief in this kind of God? It is not a help; it is a handicap. It requires too much explaining. It is a burdensome belief. The world of modern events might make us wonder if such a God were not a Devil really, for if he personally controls the world, as the old religions say he does, and if what is happening is what he is deliberately causing to happen, why, he might be a God to condemn rather than one to worship. Surely—Mr. Einstein is pleading—it is a good thing that no such God exists, for if he did, we would be filled with revulsion and despair.

And so he suggests that we cease to drag this crippling God behind us; that we give him up. It is possible to do so because there is no real reason for supposing that he exists.

But where does this leave us? Are we to become atheists, believing in nothing but ourselves? That is something that we shall surely fear to do, for we have seen all too clearly what happens when man becomes his own God.

No; that is not what Albert Einstein intended. Let us substitute for the belief in a personal God, he says, a religion depending upon those "forces which are capable of cultivating the Good, the True and the Beautiful in Humanity itself." And the newspaper reporter for the *New York Times*, who must himself have been something of a theologian—or at least of a philosopher—records in parentheses that Einstein used capital letters for Good, True and Beautiful. This use of capital letters in philosophical discussion is intended to convey that the writer is not thinking of the good, the true and the beautiful as capricious products of the universe, valuable to man but not rooted in anything greater than man. They are ultimate principles: they belong to the nature of reality: the reality that molded man. But here, I must not interpret merely; I must let Mr. Einstein speak for himself: "The most beautiful thing we can experience," he says, "is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and

stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness."

He believes, then, in the mystery beyond us, which also dwells within us and endows us with responsiveness and insight. He believes that in this mystery is a wisdom and a radiant beauty which "our dull faculties" can only very poorly comprehend. In short, he believes in a spiritual reality far greater than man of which man can have—and *does* have—experience. Evidently then, Einstein is not an atheist. He merely disbelieves in all the kinds of gods that traditional religions have exalted. He does not believe in a person, omnipotent, omnibeneficent and omni-all-the-rest. Of this kind of God he uses the word *personal*. But he means personal in the sense of likeness to human beings—which indeed is the only meaning that can be consistently and logically defended.

But God could be more than personal in the sense that human beings are personal. If God has this wisdom and radiant beauty that Einstein says he has experienced, and if he is so much greater than we are that only in a dull sense can we comprehend him—why, surely, this is God in the one true sense in which the name should be used. Mr. Einstein, apparently, preferred not to use it. Perhaps he was wise. If he had once said that he believed in God, all the traditionalists would have pounced upon this confession to make it seem to mean that he believed in the Catholic God or the Protestant God or the Jewish God. He would have been quoted repeatedly—and misleadingly—out of context. But it seems to me that he *did* believe in God in the same sense that those of us do who have rejected the traditional concepts.

What Einstein is saying is what John's Gospel says—not what it says throughout its pages: far from it—but what it says in the verse that tells us that "God is spirit." This has been mistranslated, "God is a spirit," calling forth the image of an individualized ghostly person, based upon the idea of a disembodied human being. No, the verse reads (John iv:24) *pneuma ho theos*, God is spirit, God is the breathing, the aliveness of all reality. God is the aliveness of truth and of goodness and of beauty, forever coming to pass. *Not* an almighty despot sitting on a throne. There is no throne. God lives in our living—and in all living: he is the Aliveness of the Mystery that we experience but cannot comprehend.

Or again, the New Testament says, "God is Light." But what is light? No one can define it. But we know that light is what brings the

world about us into our consciousness. The beginning of what light is, we call sight, and the fulfilment of what light is, we call wisdom. God, says the New Testament, is "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world." As over against darkness and death, there is light and life. And God is the light and God is the life.

Yet once more the New Testament tells us what God is. "God is love." How can we cope with the simplicity of this declaration? We know love—as what we resist and yet yearn for: love in all forms of all beauty, all compassion, all desiring; and we know that it dwells at the heart of life's mystery.

And Albert Einstein says that the most beautiful thing we can experience is this mystery. "He to whom this emotion is a stranger," he tells us, ". . . is as good as dead: his eyes are closed . . . To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness."

Thus, as it seems to me, do science and religion come together. Not in creeds; and not much in speculation. But in experience and in the faith it engenders. In the courage to live and strive and venture. And even if the world that Albert Einstein did so much to change is dark with fears—fears that his own discoveries have made more terrible—it is a world that, be it soon or late, will change its darkness into light through the Truth and Beauty and Goodness that Einstein found in the mystery around him and within him.

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Prayer: *O Infinite Spirit, so far beyond our comprehending, thy Truth, thy Beauty and thy Goodness—let them be radiant to our eyes. Amen.*

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